

Lost in Space

Perseverance Valley, Sarah Cave (88pp, KFS)

‘To explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before.’ And here it is, the Mars Rover trundling across a dead planet, dragging humanity’s guilt, spiritual concerns and laughable ambition with it. There is no escape, however far from home you go, however successful the mission.

‘Opportunity croons / across the universe’ and yet in the end the whole caboodle ends with a battery running out and the infinite darkness of space. In the meantime binary code flickers behind and across enigmatic poems and textual notes, proverbs and observations. Mars is the new blank canvas, in various shades of red (obviously), for poems of lamentation, self-obsession, pilgrimage and contemplation to be painted on.

Biblical hope is compared to the hope of space exploration, both offer the unknown; neither seem to convince or offer any sense of certainty. Death and despair are everywhere, somehow imprinted into the circuits of technology far from home. ‘poet, artist, rover, identity crisis’ offers one poem, alongside cadavers on the tube train and cups of tea. ‘Mornington Crescent!’ is given as what appears to be the only possible response, a feeble one at that. Radio silence ensues.

In the plethora of static, confused transmissions and ghostly space whispers we find quotes from King Lear, Ivor Cutler, *The Bible* and *Popular Mechanics*: historical guides that seem little use in the Martian or poetic landscape. Things fall apart and continue to do so. ‘She’ll not hold Captain,’ *Star Trek*’s chief engineer Scotty used to scream at Kirk during each and every episode of the original series, but ‘in space no-one can hear you scream’. ‘The centre cannot hold,’ said Yeats, but there is no centre to the universe, everything is moving away from the point of creation, but since the big bang there is only ‘big time / big space / big time / big space’ [and so on].

Sarah Cave’s work is consistently challenging and enigmatic. Here she has become a celestial wanderer, a space cadet exploring inner space, a depressed robot far from home, all cleverly disguised as Martian exploration. The ‘machine’s black magic’ turns out to be no magic at all, just prolonged mechanical death, more space junk abandoned by humans on other planets, more technological debris. This rover mission is avoidance, simply providing plenty of time for spiritual and philosophical rumination.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online states that ‘Space travel is tricky work that takes careful calculations and even more careful actions when situations get tough.’ Sarah Cave’s poetry is tricky too but also careful with regard to measure, tone and form, even if that is ‘form in a chaotic, violent way’. KFS have done the text proud here with representations of computer interface screens and grids of zeros and ones that nicely frame these complex and doubt-full poems.

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